

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

March 16, 2011

The Honorable Gregory Jaczko
Chairman
U. S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission
Washington, DC 20555-0001

Dear Chairman Jaczko:

The unfolding nuclear disaster in Japan has raised questions about the safety of nuclear power plants here in the U.S. As Senators from California, we are particularly interested in the safety of San Onofre Nuclear Generating Station, located in San Clemente, and the Diablo Canyon Nuclear Power Plant near San Luis Obispo, both of which are near earthquake faults.

Roughly 424,000 live within 50 miles of the Diablo Canyon and 7.4 million live within 50 miles of San Onofre Nuclear Generating Station. Although many safety measures have been taken to address potential hazards associated with these facilities, we need to ensure that the risk is fully evaluated.

For example, a 2008 California Energy Commission report presented very clear warnings of potential threats at both of these plants. This report found that the San Onofre plant could experience “larger and more frequent earthquakes” than the maximum 7.0 magnitude earthquake predicted when the plant was designed. It is our understanding that the NRC has not taken action to address these warnings in the report. It is also our understanding that the 2008 report found that there is an additional fault near the Diablo Canyon plant that should be taken into consideration as part of NRC’s relicensing process. We want to know if the NRC will address all of the threats, including seismic threats, described in the 2008 report at these facilities.

We ask that the Nuclear Regulatory Commission (NRC) perform a thorough inspection at these two plants to evaluate their safety and emergency preparedness plans.

In addition, we ask the NRC to answer the questions below regarding plant design and operations, type of reactor, and preparedness to withstand an earthquake or tsunami and other potential threats.

Plant Design and Operations

1. What changes to the design or operation of these facilities have improved safety at the plants since they began operating in the mid-1980s?
2. What emergency notification systems have been installed at California nuclear power plants? Has there ever been a lapse of these systems during previous earthquakes or emergencies?
3. What safety measures are in place to ensure continued power to California reactors in the event of an extended power failure?

Type of Reactor

1. What are the differences and similarities between the reactors being used in California (pressurized water reactors) and those in Japan (boiling water reactors), as well as the facilities used to house the reactors, including the standards to which they were built and their ability to withstand natural and manmade disasters?

Earthquakes and Tsunamis

1. We have been told that both Diablo Canyon and San Onofre Nuclear Generating Station are designed to withstand the maximum credible threat at both plants, which we understand to be much less than the 9.0 earthquake that hit Japan. What assumptions have you made about the ability of both plants to withstand an earthquake or tsunami? Given the disaster in Japan, what are our options to provide these plants with a greater margin for safety?
2. Have new faults been discovered near Diablo Canyon or San Onofre Nuclear Generating Station since those plants began operations? If so, how have the plants been modified to account for the increased risk of an earthquake? How will the NRC consider information on ways to address risks posed by faults near these plants that is produced pursuant to state law or recommendations by state agencies during the NRC relicensing process?

3. What are the evacuation plans for both plants in the event of an emergency? We understand that Highway 1 is the main route out of San Luis Obispo, what is the plan for evacuation of the nearby population if an earthquake takes out portions of the highway and a nuclear emergency occurs simultaneously?
4. What is the NRC's role in monitoring radiation in the event of a nuclear accident both here and abroad? What is the role of EPA and other federal agencies?
5. What monitoring systems currently are in place to track potential impacts on the U.S., including California, associated with the events in Japan?
6. Which federal agency is leading the monitoring effort and which agencies have responsibility for assessing human health impacts? What impacts have occurred to date on the health or environment of the U.S. or are currently projected or modeled in connection with the events in Japan?
7. What contingency plans are in place to ensure that the American public is notified in the event that hazardous materials associated with the events in Japan pose an imminent threat to the U.S.?

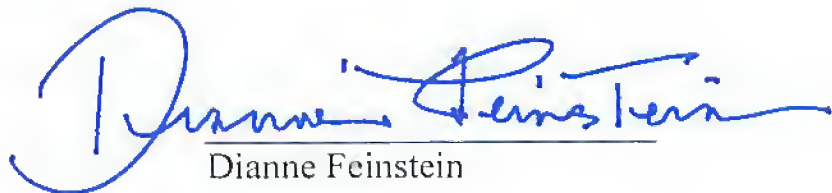
The NRC was created in the mid-1970s specifically to ensure the protection of public health and safety with regard to civilian nuclear power. The Commission plays an essential role ensuring that we learn from nuclear accidents and near misses. We hope you agree that we must identify whatever lessons are to be learned from the disaster in Japan in order to make facilities in the United States as safe as possible.

We look forward to working with you to ensure the safety of our nation's nuclear power plants and to make the changes necessary to ensure a nuclear tragedy does not occur in this country.

Sincerely,



Barbara Boxer



Dianne Feinstein